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**All in the family**

**Collins siblings — 7 of them alumni — create scholarship for student parents**

Written by UW-La Crosse University Marketing & Communications

If it’s not a record, it has to be close.

Between 1960 and 1979, seven siblings in the Collins family graduated from UW-La Crosse, forging a lifelong affinity for their alma mater.

Raised in poverty on La Crosse’s North Side, the Collins siblings say getting a college education set them up for successful lives and careers. Now, in retirement, they are giving back to future generations of students.

The Gifford and Rita Collins Family Scholarship Fund was recently established through the [UWL Alumni & Friends Foundation](https://www.uwlax.edu/foundation/) to provide student parents with financial support to help them through college. The fund is endowed, meaning it will exist and grow in perpetuity, and it will be administered through [UWL’s Self Sufficiency Program](https://www.uwlax.edu/self-sufficiency-program/).

“Growing up, we didn’t have two nickels to rub together. But by going to school here and other places, we were all able to become financially stable and in good shape,” says Timothy Collins, ’79, who led the effort to establish the scholarship fund. They decided to support student parents, he says, to ease the challenge of juggling schoolwork with parenting, and because parents were among Timothy’s favorite students when he worked as a technical college instructor.

“Some of my best students were single parents,” he says. “They worked hard, and they didn’t complain. They were busy, they had children, and they were in school to learn.”

Timothy’s sister Jeanne, ’70, remembers attending UWL as a single parent herself.

“Everyone at the school was fabulous, fabulous to me,” she says. “I was a single parent of a young child. I remember one of my professors saying, ‘You mean to tell me you have a kid and you’re going to college? You’re phenomenal.’ And I just said, ‘I can’t get any poorer. I might as well be here.’”

In the Collins family, Richard, ’60; Jeanne, ’70; Michael, ’72; Terry, ’74; Sheila, ’77; Mark, ’78; and Timothy, ’79; all earned degrees from UWL. Five other siblings — for a grand total of 12 —took different paths.

While neither of their parents, Gifford and Rita, attended college, the Collins siblings say the family always placed a value on education and took pride in the pursuit of knowledge.

The oldest brother, Richard, set an example for others to follow, becoming the first in the family to attend UWL. It was a formative experience not just for Richard, but for his siblings to see what was possible.

“I have a fond memory of attending Rich’s graduation — I think he was first in his class. We all walked over to attend his graduation,” says Bill, who would go on to attend UWL before transferring. “I remember my mother had put my shoes on the freezer because she had just had them repaired, and so I had to come to the graduation in my brother Tim’s black high-top Converse tennis shoes. I remember that day, and the way Rich set the tone for us. He definitely set the tone.”

Adds Terry: “UWL was available. It was the local university. And we learned through our experience that it was a really good one.”

Richard also inspired his brothers through his military service. Each followed in Richard’s footsteps and went on to attend college through the GI Bill.

The Collins siblings were active on campus during their time at UWL, participating in the veterans' club, athletics, fraternities, work-study and study abroad.

Sheila remembers working as a math tutor and having to help her brother Mark with one particularly challenging assignment.

“I thought they’d have to separate us,” she jokes. “He kept saying, ‘Why don’t you just explain it? Why don’t you just explain it?’ Over and over again. He got so mad at me because he couldn’t figure it out.”

Sheila also had the opportunity to study abroad in Denmark — an experience that “changed my life,” she says.

“I had never been out of the country, but I went on a year-long program,” she says, recalling how she ran out of money mid-semester, and was able to get by only because the university sent her $200. “I’ve been back to Denmark seven times, and I’m about to go again. I also met my husband, who’s half-Danish, through the same program.”

Through the scholarship fund, the Collins siblings hope current and future students, particularly those in need, will be able to earn their degree and form their own positive memories at UWL.

They have seen how support from others — the GI Bill, a $200 check when you’re out of money or the transformative example of an older brother — can change the course of someone’s life.

“Every little bit helps,” Terry says. “And our little bit might just boost somebody.”